

# 1 Corinthians - Introduction & Background

## Authorship

The *internal* evidence for Pauline authorship is strong. Paul identifies himself as the author in both the introduction (1:1) and the conclusion of the letter (16:21). References to Pauline authorship are also alluded to throughout the letter (1:12-17; 3:4,6,22). The way the author portrays himself is also consistent with the way Paul is depicted in the Book of Acts and elsewhere. Such consistency can be seen in the author's claim to have seen the resurrected Christ (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8; Acts 9:1-16; Gal 1:1,12), to be an apostle (1 Cor 1:1; 4:9; 9:1; 15:9; Acts 9:15), to have founded the Corinthian church (1 Cor 3:10; Acts 18:1-28), and to have known Apollos (1:12; 3:3-4; 4:6; Acts 18:24-28).

Pauline authorship is also well attested in *external* sources. The most well-known source is Clement of Rome's letter to the Corinthians written in 95 AD. Other external sources include the Didache, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Ignatius, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Barnabas, Athenagoras, Basilides, and Marcion.

## Destination

Both the title of the book and the greeting (1:2) show it to be addressed to a group of people known as the Corinthians. Corinth, which is located 40 miles west of Athens, has a long history dating all the way back to the Bronze Age (1200 BC). In 146 BC, the city was destroyed because of a revolt against Rome. Julius Caesar refurbished the city in 46 BC. In 27 BC, it became the political center of Achaia. Despite having a Jewish population (Acts 18:4), Corinth consisted primarily of Gentiles. This seems implied in Paul's assertion that from now on he would only go to the Gentiles after his expulsion from the synagogue (Acts 18:6). Although the official language of Corinth was Latin, the common language was Greek. The city boasted a population of 700,000 in Paul's day.

One of the city's more important characteristics was its convenient location near the ½ mile isthmian land bridge that connected the Aegean and Adriatic seas. Thus, sailors could drag their vessels across the land bridge thus avoiding the 200-mile voyage around southern Greece. Because of Corinth's strategic location near this isthmus, the city attracted a vast amount of commerce and wealth. Because sailors who were away from their families frequented Corinth, the city also became known for catering to immorality. Numerous ancient sources testify to Corinth's immorality. So prevalent was the city's debauchery that a Greek word for immorality, *korinthiazomai*, was patterned after the name Corinth. The prevalence of the immorality at Corinth was compounded further by the Temple of

Aphrodite located atop a 1900 foot mountain known as the Acrocorinthus (Acrocorinth) to the south of the city. Because this temple was the home of 1000 prostitutes, sailors could visit the temple in order to "worship." Rationalism (Acts 17:32), spiritualism (4:8), hedonism (15:32), and asceticism (7:5) were among the other religious influences at Corinth. Corinth was also the home of the Bema Seat where important cases were tried (Acts 18:12,17; 1 Cor 3:10-15). Another town just East of Corinth, known as Isthmia, was the host of the famous Isthmian games. These games were comprised of athletic contests similar to the Olympics (9:24-27).

It is best to understand the place of writing and date of the letter from the perspective of Paul's eight contacts with the city:

1. Paul's founding visit (18 months; Acts 18)
2. Paul wrote his "former letter"
3. The Corinthians write a letter to Paul (containing issues that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians)
4. Paul writes 1 Corinthians (from Ephesus)
5. Paul's "painful visit"
6. Paul writes his "severe letter"
7. Paul writes 2 Corinthians
8. Paul's anticipated visit

Paul's *first* contact with Corinth was on his founding visit to the city on his second missionary journey (Acts 18). After arriving in Corinth from Athens, Paul met Priscilla and Aquila. They were two Jews who had been expelled from Rome by Claudius' edict issued in 49 AD. Silas and Timothy joined Paul from Macedonia bringing with them a financial contribution (Acts 18:5; 2 Cor 11:8-9; Phil 4:15). These finances enabled Paul to devote himself full time to evangelism. Thus, Paul began to reason with the Jews in the synagogue. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, was converted. Many others believed as well. After being expelled from the synagogue, this newly formed church met next door in the home of Titus Justus. Paul continued to minister in Corinth for 18 months (51-52 AD) focusing exclusively on the Gentiles. It was probably during this time that Paul wrote his letters to the Thessalonians. The Jews eventually brought charges against Paul. However, the proconsul Gallio dismissed the case based upon a "separation between church and state" type of argument. Paul finally left Corinth for Ephesus, taking Priscilla and Aquila with him.

After leaving Priscilla and Aquila behind in Ephesus, Paul traveled to Caesarea and then Syrian Antioch. Priscilla and Aquila remained in Ephesus (16:19) where they mentored the talented Apollos, who eventually ministered in Corinth (1 Cor 3:6).

Paul then proceeded on his third missionary journey. He returned to Ephesus where he ministered for roughly three years (53-56 AD; Acts 19:10; 20:31). His *second* contact with Corinth happened when he heard of reports of immorality within the new church. In an attempt to rectify this problem, he dispatched the "former letter" (1 Cor 5:9). His *third* contact with the Corinthians materialized when he heard reports from Chloe's household of divisions within the church (1:11). The bearer of the former letter had also given a negative oral report of incest, litigation, and prostitution taking place within the Corinthian assembly (1 Cor 5-6). Furthermore, a delegation had arrived from Corinth asking Paul to answer some written questions (1 Cor 16:17). This combination of factors prompted Paul to write the letter known as 1 Corinthians, which was his *fourth* contact with them. **He wrote it from Ephesus (16:8) probably in the late winter or early spring of 56 AD (1 Cor 16:5-8).** Timothy was probably the bearer of the letter (1 Cor 4:17; 16:10).

Timothy reported some bad news to Paul upon his return to Ephesus. The Corinthians were unrepentant. Their continued sinful behavior prompted Paul to visit the church again. Because of the disciplinary nature of this visit, Paul later referred to it as his "painful visit" (2 Cor 1:15; 2:1-9; 12:14; 13:1-2). This visit represented his *fifth* contact with the Corinthians. His *sixth* contact with them took place when he dispatched his "severe letter" to them via Titus upon his return to Ephesus (2 Cor 2:4; 7:12). The riot in Ephesus (Acts 19; 20:1) forced Paul to leave for Troas (2 Cor 2:12).

There he searched for Titus in hopes that Titus would bring him good news about the response of the Corinthian congregation. Yet, Titus was not to be found. From Troas, Paul went to Macedonia (2 Cor 2:13; 7:5-7; 8:1). There he was finally reunited with Titus, who brought Paul some good news about the Corinthians (2 Cor 7:6-16). The majority had repented. However, there was also some bad news. A rebellious faction remained within the church that continued to challenge Paul's authority. Thus, **Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to commend the majority and rebuke the rebellious minority.** This letter represented his *seventh* contact with them. Paul's *eighth* and final contact with the Corinthians transpired when he revisited the church on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:2-4; Rom 16:1,23; 2 Cor 12:15; 13:1-2).

### **Occasion for Writing and Structure**

In Ephesus, Paul received word from Chloe's household of factions within the church (1:11). He also received word from the bearer of the "former letter" of incest, litigation, and prostitution within the church. He also had received a series of written questions from Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:17). These factors prompted Paul to write 1 Corinthians. In the letter, Paul first deals with the issues reported to him (1 Cor 1-6). This includes the issue of divisions brought to his attention by Chloe's household (1 Cor 1-4) and the issues of incest, litigation, and prostitution brought to his attention through the bearer of the "former letter" (1 Cor 5-6). In the second part of the letter, Paul deals with

issues asked of him (1 Cor 7:16). The *peri de* ("now concerning") construction alerts the reader to the fact that Paul is addressing a new subject brought to his attention by the Corinthians. Thus, in this section of the letter, Paul deals with marital issues (7:1,25), liberty (8:1), spiritual gifts (12:1), money (16:1), and the availability of Apollos (16:12).

Sometimes Paul simply used the word "now" to alert the reader that he was addressing a new subject. Thus, this section of the letter also deals with issues related to worship (11:2) and resurrection (15:1).

### **Message and Purpose**

Paul seems to have written the letter with both a general purpose and a narrower purpose in mind. First, Paul wrote the letter in order to deal with issues of practical sanctification in the Corinthian assembly. After acknowledging the Corinthians' eternal standing before God in the introduction (1:2,8), **Paul never calls this standing into question throughout the rest of the letter**. Rather, he writes to help their daily behavior reflect their new spiritual identity. In other words, he wrote in order to make the Corinthians' positional sanctification practical.

Second, Paul wrote in order to deal with the problem of divisions within the church. This is certainly the dominant theme in the first four chapters (1:11; 3:22). However, this theme pervades the rest of the letter as well. For example, the fact that the Corinthians were suing one another was fragmenting the assembly (1 Cor 6). Moreover, because some were flaunting their freedom in the presence of the weaker brother, those with a weaker conscience were being alienated and spiritually damaged (1 Cor 8–10). Also, the manner in which the Corinthians were partaking of the Lord's Supper and abusing the gifts of the Spirit was fractionalizing the church (11:18–19; 12:25). In addition, the fact that some were denying resurrection was creating doctrinal disunity within the congregation (15:12). In sum, Paul wrote the letter to assist the Corinthians in the area of practical sanctification in general and to remedy the problem of divisions in particular.

### **Unique Characteristics**

Paul uses a variety of literary devices in order to persuade his audience, including sarcasm (1 Cor 4) and OT exposition (1 Cor 5; 10). The letter also seems to develop many topics that are given scant attention elsewhere in Paul's letters. Examples include the reality of carnal Christians (1 Cor 3), marriage and divorce (1 Cor 7), proper manner of participation at worship and at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11), a proper view of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12–14), and the ramifications of the resurrection (1 Cor 15).

### **Outline**

- I. Introduction (1 Cor 1:1–9)
  - (1) Salutation (1:1–3)
  - (2) Thanksgiving (1:4–9)
- II. Conditions reported to Paul (1 Cor 1:10–6:20)

(1) By Chloe's household: divisions (1:10—4:21)

- (A) Reality of the problem (1:10-17)
- (B) The gospel contrasted with human wisdom (1:18—2:16)
  - (a) The gospel contrasted with the surrounding culture (1:18-25)
  - (b) The gospel evident in the Corinthians (1:26-31)
  - (c) Paul's lack of reliance on human wisdom (2:1-5)
  - (d) Illumination by the Holy Spirit (2:6-16)
    - (i) Those who receive God's wisdom versus those who do not (2:6-10a)
    - (ii) The Spirit of God versus the spirit of the world (2:10b-13)
    - (iii) The natural man versus the spiritual man (2:14-16)

- (C) Carnality hinders wisdom (3:1-4)
- (D) The role of God's servants (3:5-8)
- (E) Judgment on those who build with human wisdom (3:9-17)
- (F) Paul's plea for his audience to acquire divine wisdom (3:18-23)
- (G) Paul's relationship with the Corinthians (4:1-21)
  - (a) Paul's servant-hood (4:1-5)
    - (i) Paul's stewardship (4:1)
    - (ii) The requirement of faithfulness (4:2-3)
    - (iii) Paul's accountability to God (4:4-5)
  - (b) Paul's humility (4:6-13)
  - (c) Paul's authority (4:14-21)

(2) By the bearer of the letter (1 Cor 5:1--6:20)

- (A) Incest (5:1-13)
  - (a) Paul's judgment (5:1-5)
  - (b) Passover analogy (5:6-8)
  - (c) Believer's relation to fornicators (5:9-13)
- (B) Lawsuits (6:1-11)
  - (a) The church's shame (6:1-6)
  - (b) Paul's judgment (6:7-11)
- (C) Prostitution (6:12-20)
  - (a) Refutation of the Corinthians' false premises (6:12-14)
    - (i) The false premise of Pauline license (6:12)
    - (ii) The false premise that sex is just a physical act (6:13-14)
  - (b) Reasons why prostitution is wrong (6:15-20)
    - (i) Involvement of the Lord in immoral act (6:15)
    - (ii) Sex is a spiritual act (6:16)
    - (iii) It is wrong to give to a prostitute what has been united to Christ (6:17)
    - (iv) Sexual immorality is a sin against one's body (6:18)

(v) The body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19)

(vi) The Lord purchased the body (6:20)

III. Questions asked of Paul (1 Cor 7:1--16:24)

(1) Marriage (7:1-40)

(A) Married or formerly married (7:1-16)

(a) Importance of sex within marriage (7:1-6)

(b) Option of singleness (7:7-9)

(c) No divorce in believer's marriages (7:10-11)

(d) No divorce in mixed marriages (7:12-16)

(B) Contentment with circumstances (7:17-24)

(a) Application to circumcision (7:17-20)

(b) Application to slavery (7:21-24)

(C) Concerning virgins (7:25-38)

(a) Advantage of the single state (7:25-28)

(b) Reasons for remaining single (7:29-35)

(i) The reality of wartime (7:29-31)

(ii) Marriage divides one's interests (7:32-35)

(c) Legitimacy of marriage (7:36-38)

(D) Freedom to remarry after death of spouse (7:39-40)

(2) Food sacrificed to the idols (1 Cor 8:1—11:1)

(A) Priority of love over knowledge (8:1-13)

(a) Knowledge versus love (8:1-3)

(b) Content of the knowledge (8:4-6)

(c) Consideration for the weaker brother (8:7-13)

(B) The apostolic defense (9:1-27)

(a) Apostolic identification (9:1-2)

(b) Apostolic rights (9:3-14)

(c) Apostolic restraint (9:15-18)

(d) Apostolic freedom (9:19-23)

(e) Apostolic exhortation and example (9:24-27)

(C) Sinfulness of idolatry (10:1-22)

(a) Example of Israel (10:1-5)

(b) Application of Israel's example (10:6-13)

(c) Incompatibility of Christianity and idolatry (10:14-22)

(D) Marketplace food (10:23—11:1)

(3) Worship (11:2-16)

(A) Argument from culture (11:2-6)

(B) Argument from creation (11:7-12)

- (C) Argument from nature (11:13-16)
- (4) Communion (11:17-34)
  - (A) Abuses (11:17-26)
    - (a) Against the poor (11:17-22)
    - (b) Against the Lord (11:23-26)
  - (B) Corrections (11:27-34)
    - (a) Do not partake in an unworthy manner (11:27-32)
    - (b) Wait for others (11:33-34)
- (5) Spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:1–14:40)
  - (A) The test of the Spirit's control (12:1-3)
  - (B) The need for varieties of gifts (12:4-31)
    - (a) Diversity of gifts (12:4-11)
    - (b) Human body analogy (12:12-26)
    - (c) Diversity of gifts restated (12:27-31)
  - (C) The need for love (13:1-13)
    - (a) Necessity of love (13:1-3)
    - (b) Nature of love (13:4-7)
    - (c) Endurance of love (13:8-13)
      - (i) Unlike love, the revelatory gifts will cease (13:8-10)
      - (ii) Two supporting illustrations (13:11-12)
        - (a) Transition from immaturity to maturity (13: 11)
        - (b) Transition from limited sight to full sight (13:12)
      - (iii) Although faith, hope, and love will exist until Christ's return, only love will exist after Christ's return (13:13)
  - (D) The need for intelligibility (14:1-25)
    - (a) Prophecy is greater than tongues (14:1-5)
    - (b) Supporting analogies (14:6-12)
      - (i) Musical instruments (14:6-9)
      - (ii) Foreign language (14:10-12)
    - (c) Application to believers (14:13-19)
    - (d) Application to unbelievers (14:20-25)
  - (E) The need for order (14:26-40)
    - (a) Order for gifts (14:26-33)
      - (i) Tongues (14:26-28)
      - (ii) Prophets (14:29-33)
    - (b) Order for women (14:34-35)
    - (c) Concluding exhortation (14:36-40)
      - (i) Individualism (14:36)

- (ii) Spirituality (14:37)
- (iii) Disagreement with apostolic authority (14:38)
- (iv) Summation of the argument (14:39-40)
- (6) Resurrection (1 Cor 15:1-58)
  - (A) Christ's resurrection (15:1-11)
    - (a) Predicted in the OT (15:1-4)
    - (b) Attested to by eyewitnesses (15:5-11)
  - (B) Negative consequences if there is no resurrection (15:12-19)
  - (C) Positive consequences of the resurrection (15:20-28)
    - (a) Christ's resurrection guarantees the believer's resurrection (15:20-23)
    - (b) Christ's resurrection guarantees the Father's ultimate victory (15:24-28)
  - (D) More negative consequences if there is no resurrection (15:29-34)
    - (a) The futility of baptism for the dead (15:29)
    - (b) The futility of self-sacrifice (15:30-32)
    - (c) Paul's exhortation (15:33-34)
      - (i) Separate from bad company (15:33)
      - (ii) Gain knowledge (15:34)
  - (E) The resurrection body (15:35-49)
    - (a) Objection stated (15:35)
    - (b) Example of seeds (15:36-38)
    - (c) Example of human and animal bodies (15:39-40)
    - (d) Example of celestial bodies (15:41)
    - (e) The perishable body versus the imperishable body (15:42-44)
    - (f) Those in Adam versus those in Christ (15:45-49)
  - (F) The Rapture (15:50-58)
- (7) The collection (16:1-12)
  - (A) Arrangements for the collection (16:1-4)
  - (B) Future travel plans (16:5-12)
    - (a) From Paul (16:5-9)
    - (b) From Timothy (16:10-11)
    - (c) From Apollos (16:12)

IV. Conclusion (1 Cor 16:13-24)

- (1) Exhortation (16:13-18)
- (2) Greeting and benediction (16:19-24)

